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David Javitch: Employee Management

Getting the Most Out of Each Employee

Learning how to deal with different working styles is a sure way to improve productivity.
By David Javitch | September 30, 2007

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What are the signs of lowered performance in your organization? To start, employees don't look busy. Individual, team or unit productivity has decreased from where it should be. Morale is down. And you sense that "things" could be better.

If these are the signs, what are the effects? Certainly workers could be more satisfied; but they're not. Their lack of energy results in less spontaneity and productivity. Revenue and profitability suffer, as does individual satisfaction.

So what can you do? First take the temperature of the work environment. You need to gather data to support your thoughts and impressions; compare the current quarter's numbers with those from previous quarters. Look at and compare individual rates of productivity. Then gather impressions from other supervisors or managers to share and compare individual perspectives and perceptions. Finally, summarize your data into conclusions.

Addressing the Employees

Next prepare to meet with the employee in question. This isn't a formal performance interview; it's simply a conversation supported by factual data and impressions. Start by asking the employee what his or her perception of work output is. Sometimes employees don't realize that their performance has been decreasing or that an issue exists. Sometimes they may be aware of the issue, but try to hide the matter, hoping you don't notice. The issues can be professional or personal, but either way, they can be distracting the employee from optimal job performance. That's where you, as the boss, need to intervene. Pause and then present your data comparing current performance with past performance, as well as your perceptions of the problem.

Your goal is to help the employee identify the cause of the decreased productivity and motivation. This is where Douglas McGregor, a renowned motivation theorist, can offer insight into what the motivational issues and results may be. Stephen Robbins details some of his important theories in *Essentials of Organizational Behavior*.

McGregor would suggest that you identify the amount of direction the employee needs:

Some people need clear and very specific input from a supervisor as to what a particular task entails, who to involve, what the final product or service will look like, and what the steps are to accomplish the goal. They expect management to provide formal direction, and they don't seek additional responsibility. When job specifics aren't provided, aren't clear or aren't sufficient, the employee won't be motivated. His or her work performance will be less than optimal. It's a lose-lose situation for everyone.

To increase output, satisfaction and success for this type of worker, simply be more precise, detailed and explicit about the goals, processes and people involved in the project or task. This solution assumes, of course, that you have the time and patience to devote to this employee. If you don't, then he or she will most likely not be effective. Ironically, that person will tend to blame you for not being a good boss and providing enough input and encouragement.

Other employees don't like, need or want a lot of structure, input and direction from you. These workers function very well when you give them minimal amounts of control or oversight. They're capable of self-direction and self-control, and they like and seek additional responsibility. Furthermore, they believe themselves capable of innovating and improving processes and procedures. These self-motivated and usually high-performing employees are a joy to work with because they are usually easy to get along with and, most importantly, serve as a role model for others.

Both types of employees, however, can be problematic for an employer. If you're a controlling type of leader, obviously you would interact well with those employees who need your style of leadership. Similarly, if you're more of a *laissez-faire* leader, you would work most successfully with more independent employees. The difficulty erupts when there's a mismatch between employee and employer; when a hands-off leader works with an employee who needs a great deal of direction and structure. The same problem arises when a controlling leader works with more independent employees.

Dealing with Differences in Styles

In the first case, the leader won't provide enough direction to satisfy the employee. And the employee's work, morale and productivity suffer because he or she hasn't been given enough direction. In the case of the controlling boss and the employee who thrives on freedom, this employee too will be unmotivated, unproductive and dissatisfied. He'll resent the intrusion on his job process and individualism, believing that he could function more effectively without the boss's intense direction. In both cases, the boss was well-intentioned; the problem was just that there was a mismatch between the needs of the employee and the needs of the leader.

To get the most out of each employee, first ask the employee his opinion of the situation and then address the concerns. Next, help the employee understand his needs in terms of direction, structure and control. To save the situation and improve productivity, start with clarification of working styles. Then look for opportunities to reach compromises between individual needs and motivational styles.

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